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New exploration in the Chitral Valley, Pakistan: an extension of the Gandharan Grave culture

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New survey in the Chitral Valley has doubled the number of recorded Gandharan Grave culture sites in the region and extended their geographical range. The numbers and location of sites indicates that the Gandharan Grave culture was well established in the Chitral valley, suggesting that the valley may have been central to this cultural development, rather than marginal.

Key-words: Pakistan, Chitral, Gandharan Grave culture, field survey, chronology

Introduction

During 1999 the International Hindu Kush Expedition, funded by the Royal Geographical Society, conducted fieldwork in the Chitral Valley. The objective of the expedition was to study the impact of mountain rivers on human and natural activity (Meadows pers.comm.). The expedition included an archaeological team to examine the potential of surveying settlement sites. Given the scarcity of previous archaeological investigation, this was an important opportunity to define the location, number and type of sites in the middle Chitral Valley. It should be emphasized that this was a preliminary exploration, and in addition to time constraints, the volatile political situation and the nature of the terrain limited the survey. However, even with these restraints, the number of known Gandharan Grave culture sites in the valley was doubled. The wealth of archaeology that was recorded justifies future investment in field seasons and systematic survey.

Chitral is one of the most isolated regions in Pakistan. Located in the extreme northwest of the North West Frontier Province, it has the Afghan provinces of Badakshan to the west and Wakhan to the north, the Northern Areas of Pakistan to the east, and the Districts of Dir and Swat to the south. There are more than 40 peaks over 6000 m in Chitral District, and these contrast with valleys that plunge more than 900 m below the main settlements (Dichter 1967:

40–42; Haserodt 1996: 3). Extremes of terrain and climate have resulted in water resources playing an important role in shaping social organization, in addition to influencing settlement and subsistence patterns (Haserodt 1996: 9; Israrud-Din 1996: 19; Young *et al.* 2000: 138). This role has led to the clustering of settlement on the fertile Pleistocene fluvio-glacial terraces and alluvial fans, as opposed to the arid and rocky slopes (FIGURE 1; Haserodt 1996: 5; Stacul 1969a: 92).

Due to its position in the Hindu Kush, Chitral is accessible only by high passes, of which the most important are the Lowari (3118 m) and the Shandur (3374 m). These links with Pakistan are closed between September and April by snow and rain, although it is possible to divert westwards into Afghanistan following the line of the Chitral river before crossing back into Pakistan. Despite its modern isolation and extreme terrain, Chitral was less remote in the past and its position made it an important transit corridor between south, central and western Asia. The historical significance of this feature, a section of the famous Silk Road, is attested by scholars who have identified it as a significant channel for trade and the movement of ideas and people (Stein 1921).

The Gandharan Grave culture

The Gandharan Grave culture is the name given by Dani (1992: 395) to the protohistoric cemeteries that were first noted in an area approxi-

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FIGURE 1. *Chitral Valley showing Chitral River, alluvial fans, fertile cultivated terraces and rocky slopes.*

mately corresponding to ancient Gandhara — the easternmost satrapy or province of the Achaemenid Empire. Stacul (1987), however, prefers to refer to the sites as protohistoric or pre-Buddhist cemeteries. Excavations in Dir, at Balambat and Timargarha (Dani 1967), and in Swat at Aligrama, Bir-kot-ghundai, Kalakoderay and Loebanr I (Stacul 1987) suggest a homogeneous culture, represented by similar grave and burial patterns, pottery assemblages, and other artefacts (Dani 1992: 407–8, 415; Stacul 1989: 322).

This core of Gandharan sites was extended north to Chitral by Stacul's (1969a) brief survey and excavation, east to the Indus (Stacul 1987: 64–5; 1966) and south to the Vale of Peshawar (Khan 1973: 34). It should also be noted that no comparative research has been carried out in Afghanistan, but it is now highly likely that sites will be found on the Afghan side of the border. The cemetery site of Sarai

Khola, in the Pakistani province of Punjab, has also been assigned by some to the culture (Allchin 1995: 125). Further affinities have been recorded with prehistoric burial sites in regions as distant as the southern Himalayas of Uttar Pradesh (Agrawal *et al.* 1995: 552). Although the extent of the culture may be expanded to a region far greater than the extent of the satrapy of Gandhara, the term Gandharan Grave culture has been retained here for ease of reference.

The similarity in grave construction, burial patterns and pottery assemblages, combined with stratigraphic excavation, has allowed the construction of both internal phasing at each site, and a relative chronology. Despite the different dating schemes used by different projects (Dani 1967; Stacul 1987; 1969b), the correlation between sites has allowed the development of a chronology based, in part, on revised radiocarbon dates (TABLE 1).

Interpretations of the Gandharan Grave culture

Previous interpretations have suggested that the culture was introduced into the region by incoming groups, possibly Indo-Aryan speaking peoples (Allchin & Allchin 1982: 349; Dani 1978: 52–3; Stacul 1969b: 86–7). These interpretations use a combination of modern linguistic patterns, hypothetical language families, the Rigveda and the concept of a post-Harappan dark age (Mallory 1989; Dani 1992; Parpola 1994), all of which are open to question. An alternative, that of indigenous development, is supported by evidence from recent excavation and exploration, and the re-interpretation of existing material (Coningham 1995; Shaffer 1993). In parallel, Stacul has recently identified a continuum within the Swat valley from c. 1700–400 BC, and now supports the concept of an indigenous development for the culture. He suggests that the distinctive funerary monuments may have been developed in response to increasing agricultural intensification and population pressure (Stacul 1987: 68–9, 121).

Archaeological survey in Chitral

Due to the limitations identified above, little research has been previously carried out within Chitral, with the exception of Stacul's single season in 1968 when he discovered a number

of protohistoric cemeteries close to Chitral town (Stacul 1969a: 93–5). He noted the contrast between the fertile terraces and fans and the 'very arid and stony nature of the valley' and the frequency of the cemeteries within the former (Stacul 1969a: 92). Comparisons of the new graves' construction methods and associated artefacts led Stacul to suggest that they belonged to the 'Gandharan Grave culture'. This conclusion was strengthened by Allchin's study of Iron Age ceramic vessels from the modern town of Ayun (Allchin 1970).

Our own preliminary survey in 1999 was restricted to the middle Chitral valley between Ayun and Chitral Town (FIGURE 2), building on Stacul's earlier work, augmented by a brief survey in the Rambour valley. During two weeks of survey, 18 sites were identified and it is clear that most may be assigned to the Gandharan Grave culture (TABLE 2). This attribution is based upon similarities between artefacts from illicit excavations at a number of surveyed sites in Chitral, as well as structural details exposed at those sites, and published material from Swat (Stacul 1987) and Dir (Dani 1967). For example, the circular pits, marked by circular rings of boulders, containing rectangular cists at Kolo Gree (Site 9) (FIGURE 3) have parallels with Timargarha (Dani 1967) and Zarif Karuna (Khan 1973). Further analogies may be made between

period (Swat chronology)	site	¹⁴ C date (cal BC)	source	interpretation
IV	Aligrama	1360–1300	Stacul 1987	Chalcolithic
		1710–1690	Stacul 1987	
		1210–1090	Possehl 1994	
	Loebanr III	1730–1600	Stacul 1987	Chalcolithic
		1560–1225	Possehl 1994	
	Timargarha	15th–14th century 1590–1470	Dani 1967 Possehl 1994	prehistoric necropolis
V	Aligrama	1540–655	Possehl 1994	protohistoric
	Timargarha	8th–9th century 1000–800	Dani 1967 Possehl 1994	Achaemenid protohistoric necropolis

N.B. only sites with radiocarbon dates have been included

TABLE 1. *Summary chronology of Swat & Dir Protohistoric sites.*

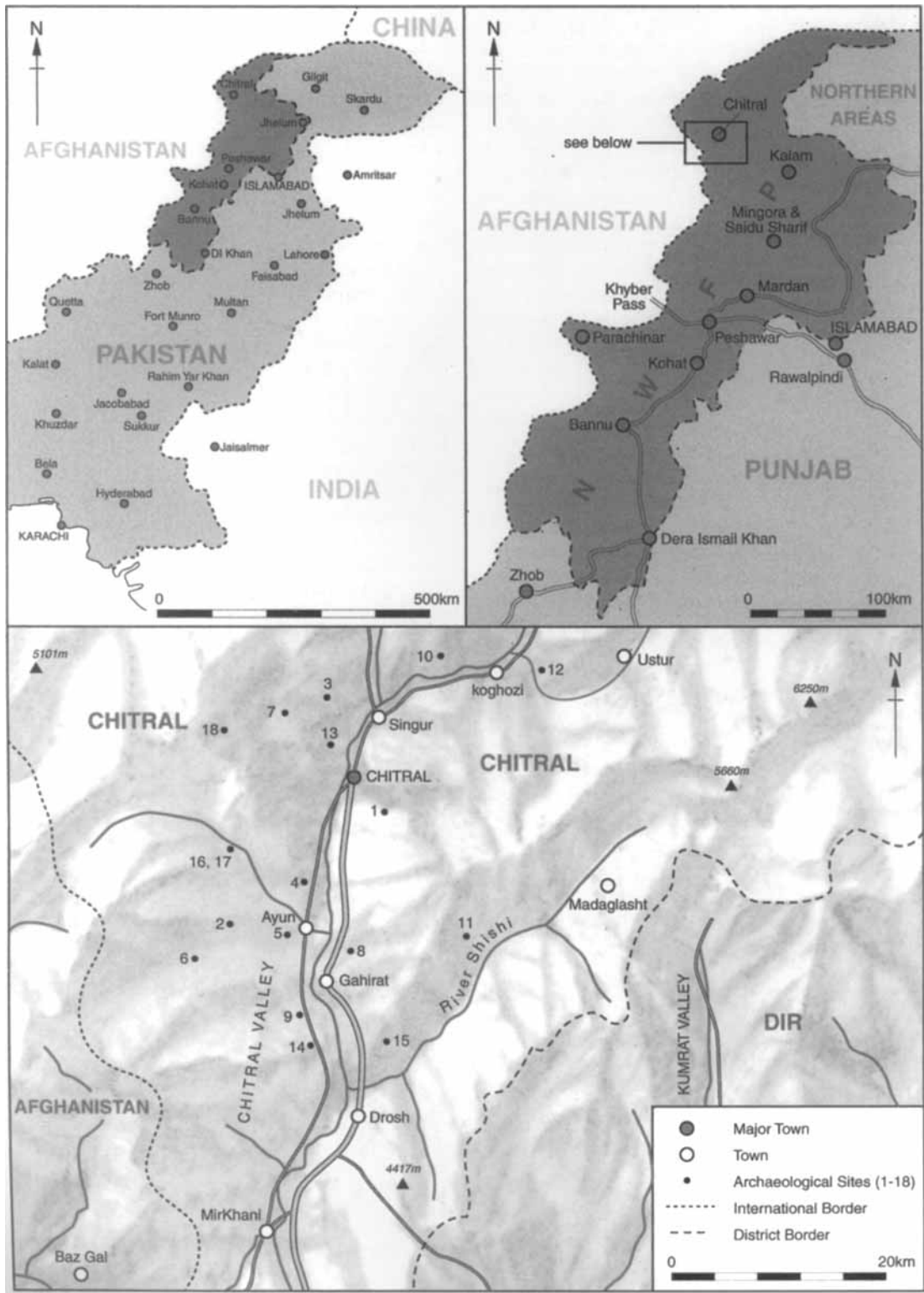


FIGURE 2. Map of Chitral Valley showing distribution of sites surveyed.

two fiddle-shaped terracotta human figurines and a 'burnished red ware' bowl on stand from Lashtotak (Site 4), and specimens recovered from Timargarha and the basal levels of the Early Historic city, the Bala Hisar of Charsadda (Wheeler 1962; Ali *et al.* 1998).

The discovery of 15 new sites, affiliated with the Gandharan Grave culture, is significant as it doubles the number of the sites in the region. It is also interesting to note that although most were located within the fans and terraces of the valley bottoms, as observed by Stacul (1969a: 92), the remaining five were recorded on the arid and rocky slopes above. Indeed, it is more likely that sites will be disturbed within the fans and terraces as these are intensively cultivated today. The presence of two sites within the extremely narrow and inaccessible Rambour valley extends the distribution of Gandharan Grave sites to the very borders of Afghanistan.

In comparison with our knowledge of the archaeology of Dir and Swat, the sequence in Chitral is still uncertain and models have placed these valleys as marginal in terms of contact and development when compared with regions to the north and south (Dani 1992: 415, 419; Tusa 1979: 690–91). However, evidence from Dir (Dani 1967) and Swat (Stacul 1997: 344; 1989: 322) suggests that these valleys were engaging in long-distance trade of both goods and ideas in prehistoric times, had sophisticated subsistence strategies and were in regu-

lar contact with adjacent regions (Ali *et al.* 1998).

The confirmation of a concentration of Gandharan graves in Chitral has important implications, not only for the prehistory of Chitral, but also for the northwest of the sub-continent. Not only is this the most northerly discovery of these sites, but it is evident that they are present in significant numbers and concentration. This suggests that the Gandharan Grave culture was well established here, reinforcing the idea that the entire valley system was central to this cultural development, rather than remote or marginal; a development which resulted in the emergence of early urban forms such as Hathial and the Bala Hisar of Charsadda on the plains in the beginning of the 1st millennium BC (Ali *et al.* 1998).

Within Chitral, the occupation of three valleys by the non-Muslim Kalasha is also very important and the contrast between the Kalasha and their neighbours has been described as a 'remarkable example of cultural resistance at the end of this twentieth century' (Loude 1996: 329). One of the intriguing questions of social identity in Chitral is the origin of the Kalasha. While most research has focussed on linguistic reconstruction (e.g. Cacopardo 1996; Dani 1992; Parkes 1996), little work has been carried out in terms of archaeological research. Our identification of the presence of Gandharan Grave sites within the Kalasha valleys has interesting implications for the prehistory of this area.

no.	name	structures	fan/terrace	slope	period
1	Broz Tamunyak	cists?	X		Gandharan Grave Culture?
2	Thuryandeh, Ayun	cists	X		Gandharan Grave Culture
3	Sangoor	cists	X		Gandharan Grave Culture
4	Lashtotak, Ayun	cists	X		Gandharan Grave Culture
5	Saham Junah, Ayun	cists?	X		Gandharan Grave Culture
6	Noghoor Gree	buildings/wall		X	Historic Fort?
7	Sangoor, Chakasht	cists		X	Gandharan Grave Culture
8	Gahirat	cists		X	Gandharan Grave Culture
9	Kolo Gree	cists/circle		X	Gandharan Grave Culture
10	Noghorzum	buildings/wall		X	Historic Fort?
11	Lawar (Larsar)	buildings/wall		X	Historic Fort?
12	Koghuzi/Zukhshain	cists?	X		Gandharan Grave Culture
13	Chewdhok	cists	X		Gandharan Grave Culture
14	Jashagha Goal	cists	X		Gandharan Grave Culture
15	Basnak	cists?	X		Gandharan Grave Culture
16	Balanguru, Rambour	cist		X	Gandharan Grave Culture
17	Chakguru, Rambour	cist?		X	Gandharan Grave Culture
18	Bala Hisar	cists	X		Gandharan Grave Culture

TABLE 2. *Chitral Archaeological Survey: summary of sites*



FIGURE 3. *Gandharan Grave site at Kolo Gree (Site 9), showing stone lined burial pit and orthostats.*

Conclusion

The results of our single season in Chitral are significant and the density of archaeological remains indicates that further research should be undertaken. This should take two forms, firstly the systematic location and mapping of sites in order to test our initial suggestions concerning cultural affinity, site location; and secondly, the excavation of selected sites. The latter would allow formal comparisons with published Gandharan Grave sites, and contribute to the development of a new model of social organization and change in the northwest region of south Asia during the late Iron Age. Indeed, the early 1st millennium BC radiocarbon dates from excavations at the Bala Hisar of Charsadda, in combination with 'burnished red ware' and rippled rim vessels from its sequence, now provides clear continuity between the Gandharan Grave culture and the development of the Early Historic cities (Ali *et al.* 1998). Predating Persian contact by several centuries, this evidence

refutes Wheeler's hyper-diffusionistic models (Wheeler 1962) and further strengthens the case for the indigenous development of South Asia's second urbanization (Coningham 1995). Another interesting speculation, though one that cannot be pursued at present, is the presence of Gandharan Grave sites in Afghanistan. Although none have been published, given the location and density of sites to the east of the border it is likely that this pattern extends over a considerable part of northwest Afghanistan. Such a pattern would allow us to test whether Chitral, a peripheral area today, was the centre of this cultural development in antiquity; however, such a hypothesis can only be tested once the volatile political and military environment of the region abates.

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